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Reading During Adolescence: Why Adolescents Choose (or Do Not Choose) Books

Katherine Wilkinson, Valentina Andries, Danielle Howarth, Jane Bonsall, Shari Sabeti, Sarah McGeown

To encourage more adolescents to read books, listening to their perspectives and experiences of book reading is a good start.

From childhood to adolescence, declines in positive attitudes toward reading and in the frequency of reading have been commonly cited. Starting in childhood (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995) and continuing throughout adolescence (Clark, 2019; McKenna, Conradi, Lawrence, Jang, & Meyer, 2012), educators are often concerned about the lack of interest, enjoyment, and engagement that many adolescents show toward book reading. However, in a recent U.K. literacy survey of children and young adults ($n = 49,049$), it was found that middle adolescence was a particularly vulnerable period for reading attitudes and engagement (Clark, 2019). Indeed, adolescents ages 14–16 reported enjoying reading less and were less likely to read daily than their younger (ages 8–14) and older (ages 16–18) counterparts (Clark, 2019). Furthermore, 14–16-year-olds were less likely to say that there were lots of things they would like to read and that they could find things to read that interested them.

In the present study, we sought to understand adolescents' (ages 15 and 16) reasons for reading and not reading print books. To be succinct, we use the term *books* throughout to refer to print books. To promote book reading among adolescents, it is essential that teachers understand what motivates them to read books, as well as understand the challenges associated with encouraging book reading. Adolescents are engaging in diverse literacy activities (e.g., Clark, 2019; Korobkova & Collins, 2019), yet book reading has been consistently associated with a wide range of positive cognitive and academic outcomes. For example, students who read more

books have better general knowledge, verbal abilities, reading comprehension/speed/accuracy, spelling skill, and school achievement (Duncan, McGeown, Griffiths, Stothard, & Dobai, 2016; Mol & Bus, 2011; Mol & Jolles, 2014; Torppa et al., 2019).

Whereas digital texts offer a number of cognitive benefits (Turner, Hicks, & Zucker, 2019), books are more beneficial than other text types for reading and

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language outcomes (Duncan et al., 2016; Torppa et al., 2019). Furthermore, the majority (>90%) of adolescents use websites, text messaging, and instant messaging daily, whereas far fewer (<50%) read books daily (Clark, 2019). For these reasons, understanding why adolescents read (and do not read) books is crucial. In this study, we engaged in discussions with adolescents, and promoted conversations among them, to identify why they read and do not read books during this period of their lives. This qualitative study involved training a group of adolescents to interview their peers on this topic, to raise understanding among teachers and researchers.

Reading Motivation

Theories of reading motivation proposed to explain what motivates young people to read (books) are particularly relevant to this study. In their conceptual review of reading motivation, Conradi, Jang, and McKenna (2014) defined it as “the drive to read resulting from a comprehensive set of an individual’s beliefs about, attitudes towards, and goals for reading” (p. 154). Reading motivation is multidimensional; that is, children and adolescents are motivated to read for numerous reasons (e.g., Schiefele, Schaffner, Möller, & Wigfield, 2012; Wolters, Denton, York, & Francis, 2014).

In a recent conceptual review of reading motivation research published between 2003 and 2013, Conradi et al. (2014) noted a lack of research with adolescents: Only 8% of the research reviewed was conducted with adolescents ages 14–18. Furthermore, the research field was dominated by quantitative research studies: Only 3.3% of studies included were solely qualitative (Conradi et al., 2014). Although excellent qualitative work exists (e.g., Howard, 2011; Wilhelm & Smith, 2014), there is evidently a need for more to contribute to our evolving understanding of what drives adolescents to choose to read (or not), from their perspectives.

A number of theoretical frameworks have been used to study reading motivation; however, the most common (Conradi et al., 2014) is self-determination theory, which we drew on in this study. In self-determination theory, different forms of motivation are identifiable within individuals based on the extent to which they are self-determined (i.e., autonomous). Self-determination theory differentiates between intrinsic reading motivation (i.e., reading for internal reasons; e.g., a curiosity to learn, the desire to become immersed in a story) and extrinsic reading motivation (i.e., reading for external reasons; e.g., to please the teacher/parents, to gain a reward; Conradi et al., 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wigfield

& Guthrie, 1997). Other theories of reading motivation have contributed significantly to our understanding of reading motivation (e.g., expectancy–value theory), but these theories are conceptually more restricted. Self-determination theory has been described as the most comprehensive theoretical framework of reading motivation that exists at present (Schiefele & Löweke, 2018) and allows for an extensive range of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators to be identified.

Intervening to Promote Adolescent Reading

Principles and practices to encourage adolescents’ reading motivation do not focus solely on promoting motivation within adolescents but also on creating contexts conducive to raising motivation and engagement in reading. For example, classroom practices that support choice, importance, collaboration, and competence have been associated with increased intrinsic reading motivation among adolescents (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014). In addition, teachers’ behaviors have been found to predict adolescents’ intrinsic reading motivation (De Naeghel et al., 2014). Furthermore, a reading intervention with adolescents focused on principles known to support motivation (e.g., collaboration, voice, relevance/importance, self-efficacy) alongside cognitive factors (word reading and fluency), acknowledging the importance of both motivational and cognitive factors in adolescents’ reading skill and development (Kim et al., 2016). Furthermore, in their synthesis of instructional approaches to support adolescents’ reading, Goldman, Snow, and Vaughn (2016) recognized the importance of active, purposeful, and engaged reading, in addition to social supports and opportunities to participate in literacy activities.

In the United Kingdom and the United States, there are also good examples of initiatives and resources to promote adolescent reading. In Scotland, for example, the First Minister’s Reading Challenge was introduced across high schools in 2018–2019 to promote reading for pleasure. In doing so, the challenge encouraged greater opportunities for students to share their reading interests, improving staff knowledge of teenage literature, creating appealing spaces to read, and building in time to read for pleasure. Initial results were positive; for example, 66% of schools participating in the evaluation felt that their students were reading for pleasure more (Scottish Book Trust, 2019).

In the United States, McGaha and Igo (2012) reported on a voluntary summer reading program for high school students that included several features supportive of

adolescent reading motivation (e.g., autonomous nature of the program, access to high-interest texts, reading material relevant to own lives, opportunities for social collaboration). Following the summer reading program, McGaha and Igo found positive reports from students, including engagement by those who would not have otherwise read during the summer.

With regard to resources, in 2019, the Scottish Book Trust launched Bookzilla, an app codesigned with, and aimed at, adolescents (ages 11–14) to encourage and support book reading and help them find books aligning with their interests. Also available in the United Kingdom and the United States is Accelerated Reader (AR) and myON, which, following subscription, provides students with support to select books suited to their interests and skill level (Accelerated Reader) and access to thousands of digital books (myON).

In this article, we describe adolescents' motivations for reading books, that is, why adolescents chose to read or not read books. In the United Kingdom, children's and adolescents' (ages 8–18; $n = 42,406$) reports of their reading activities suggest that book reading forms a significant component of their daily leisure time reading choices, albeit falling behind other text types, such as text messages, websites, song lyrics, and social networking sites (Clark & Teravainen, 2017). However, Scottish adolescents' views on reading enjoyment and their reported time spent reading are consistently below the OECD average, suggesting a need to intervene and support (Scottish Government, 2018).

Understanding motivators, in addition to barriers or challenges to book reading, is essential for encouraging adolescents to read books more frequently. By conducting a qualitative research study, we prioritized adolescents' voices to understand their reading motivations during a period of their lives when many adolescents are less motivated or engaged as readers. We aimed to understand why adolescents (ages 15 and 16) choose to read or not read books. We sought to make a unique contribution to research and practice in this area by exploring why adolescents do not read books, in addition to why they do, as previous research typically has focused solely on the latter. Furthermore, our methodological approach (training adolescents as researchers) is novel and has the potential to inform research design in this area.

Method

This qualitative research study involved providing research training to 10 high school students (hereafter named adolescent researchers) from a single high school

so they could interview their peers about what they read and why. We chose to train adolescents to conduct the interviews to examine whether more informal conversations about reading activities and motivations would arise. These interviews were combined with interviews conducted by our adult research team. All adolescent researchers received a full day of research training at the University of Edinburgh, where they received guidance on ethics, learned interview techniques, and practiced interviewing and being interviewed. All interview questions were also discussed with the students and trialed during this day.

Participants

In total, 39 high school students (ages 15 and 16; approximately 50% female) from two U.K. schools (school size = approximately 600 and approximately 1,400, respectively) were interviewed for this project. Both schools were within three miles of the same city center and provided education for students from a wide range of economic backgrounds. Parents' and adolescents' consent were required prior to participation in the study. The school librarian was asked to identify students who they would label as engaged or disengaged readers, to ensure a representative sample. At the start of each interview, students were asked whether they thought of themselves as a reader. In answer to this, 23 said yes (this included four "sort of/sometimes" responses), and 16 said no (this included four "used to be" responses).

Data Collection and Analysis

In total, 19 interviews were conducted by three members of the research/author team (Valentina, Danielle, and Jane), who interviewed the 10 adolescent researchers and nine other adolescents from a different high school using interview questions designed for the study. These questions included asking students what they thought it meant to be a reader and whether they thought of themselves as a reader. Following this, students were asked what they read, why, and how it makes them feel. This question was asked numerous times until the full complexity of students' reading activities (e.g., books, social networking sites) were covered. For this article, we analyzed data relating specifically to adolescents' references to book reading. After being interviewed by a member of the research team, the adolescent researchers interviewed two of their chosen peers, using the same interview questions, resulting in a further 20 interviews.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full by three members of the research team (Valentina, Danielle, and Jane) and shared. Themes were identified using a data-driven inductive thematic analysis approach, using the six phases of thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). The research team read through the interview transcripts either in a group (Valentina, Danielle, and Jane) or individually (Katherine and Sarah), generating initial codes (forget reality, get away from real life; like learning, acquire knowledge) and searching for themes (escapism; learning) within the data (phases 1–3). The research team then met two times to review, define, and name the themes (phases 4–6). Some themes were more prevalent than others, but all themes identified are shared here, and conventions to convey prevalence are used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It should be noted that interviews conducted by the researchers and adolescent researchers were transcribed and analyzed separately initially (phase 1–3), but initial themes emerging after phase 3 were the same, so the data were integrated for phases 4–6.

Results and Discussion

Why Do Adolescents Read Books?

Many adolescents ($n = 11$) spoke of reading to help them relax: “I read a lot. It’s like the best thing for relaxing.” “I feel quite calm and peaceful. Like, I’m focused more on the story than on what’s actually happening around me.” Indeed, this final point links to adolescents’ ($n = 13$) reports of reading books for absorption: “I get into the book quite a lot, and I just forget about my surroundings.” “I like to imagine that the characters are real—so, like, fairies are real...and they’re kind of like my little friends.” On a related note, adolescents ($n = 5$) reported that books provided a way of getting away from reality, a form of escapism: “It’s good because if there’s a main character, you can go into their role and kind of forget reality.” “Because they are enjoyable, and I can get away from my real life.”

Several adolescents ($n = 7$) read books to learn or find out about the world: “My favorite would be historical fiction because I like the—I like learning about stuff.” “I like psychology [books] for the knowledge. You understand how people are thinking a bit more.”

Some adolescents ($n = 4$) also reported that reading books developed their empathy. Reading provides an opportunity to explore and understand other people’s emotions and perspectives: “It gets you so attached, like it makes you feel feelings for the characters and that.” “I like to read lots of books ‘cause I’m just interested in reading other people’s views on other things.”

Furthermore, a few adolescents ($n = 4$) remarked that reading provides a form of social capital, offering opportunities to develop networks/friendships and contribute to discussions: “[Reading] also brings up a personality, and it gives you things to talk about with other people.” “Yeah, because they get referenced quite a bit sometimes—‘cause I’ve read it, and I can understand when people say, ‘Oh, it’s turning into’—is it 19—is it 1982?”

Finally, some adolescents ($n = 5$) reported that book reading could also be exciting and thrilling, which was also a reason to read: “Like, you get really excited reading it, and then you don’t want to stop, ‘cause you don’t want to leave it on a cliff-hanger, or you just want to persuade yourself to keep reading it. It’s a great feeling.”

These spontaneous descriptions by adolescents of why they read clearly have implications for what they read. For example, students who read for absorption or escapism, for example, would be more likely to be drawn to fiction, whereas those who read to learn would be more likely to be drawn to nonfiction. The idea that students’ reading motivation drives their reading choices aligns with the findings of quantitative research by McGeown, Osborne, Warhurst, Norgate, and Duncan (2016) and of qualitative work by Edmunds and Bauserman (2006) and Wilhelm and Smith (2014).

Interestingly, adolescents referred more often to aspects of intrinsic motivation than extrinsic motivation; adolescents said they were reading to learn, to relax, for absorption and escapism, to develop empathy, for social capital, and/or for excitement. These intrinsic motivators align with the limited qualitative research that exists in different cultural contexts. For example, in Howard’s (2011) focus groups with young teenagers (ages 12–15) in Canada, students spoke of reading to learn about the world, to develop empathy, to be empowered, to be entertained, to escape, to relax, to enhance their imagination, and for reassurance. Furthermore, Wilhelm and Smith (2014) discussed different motivators for reading, including reading for enjoyment, work, intellectual pleasure, and social reasons. Furthermore, they recognized that different genres of books (e.g., romance, dystopian, horror) offer readers different types of pleasure and experiences.

In the present study, adolescents rarely mentioned reading to achieve a good grade, to please their teacher/parents, or to outperform their peers (all components of extrinsic reading motivation explored in studies with children; McGeown, Norgate, & Warhurst, 2012). Furthermore, adolescents also felt that there were fewer extrinsic motivators in their life (i.e., parents and teachers were less likely to encourage them to read,

which we discuss later). Of course, some adolescents will be motivated by external factors (see Troyer, 2017), and references to extrinsic motivators were mentioned by students. For example, when asked about what they read outside of school, a few students ($n = 3$) mentioned reading books specifically from school: “I don’t really read anything else—just, like, if I have to read things in school.” “Well, for English, we need to read books.” Furthermore, others ($n = 5$) mentioned being motivated to read by a movie or television show, which created a desire to read the book: “I’m also reading *Game of Thrones* [by George R.R. Martin]. I loved the series, so I gotta read the book.” Whereas one student mentioned being encouraged by her mother to read (extrinsic motivator), this seemed to have been internalized: “Well, I want to do well in school. My mum’s always like, ‘If you don’t do your homework, you’re not gonna do well in school,’ so she makes me read quite a lot, too.”

Indeed, the relation between intrinsic and extrinsic reading motivation is complex, and extrinsic motivators have the potential to become internalized. As we saw earlier, if students enjoy an author, book series, or

genre that they have been introduced to in school, they may choose to read more work by that author or in that series or genre in their own time.

Indeed, creating a dichotomy between intrinsic and extrinsic reading motivation is arguably unhelpful (Schiefele & Löweke, 2018), as students’ reasons for reading may be driven by both (McGeown et al., 2012; see Figure 1). However, recognizing that motivators for reading vary in the extent to which they are self-determined is still useful for teachers. For example, it can help focus teachers’ attempts toward increasing students’ intrinsic motivation, given that it is more consistently associated with positive reading outcomes (e.g., Becker, McElvany, & Kortenbruck, 2010; McGeown et al., 2012, 2016; Miyamoto, Pfost, & Artelt, 2019; Wang & Guthrie, 2004) than extrinsic motivation.

Why Adolescents Do Not Read Books

Whereas there exists some (albeit limited) qualitative research on what motivates adolescents to read books (Howard, 2011; Troyer, 2017; Wilhelm & Smith, 2014),

Figure 1
Why Adolescents Read Books: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivators



there is an absence of research on why adolescents do not read books. In the present study, several adolescents ($n = 5$) felt that they do not have time to read for pleasure anymore: "I used to read books, and I used to like them, but I just don't have time anymore." "I think as you get older, you just have less free time. We've got revision and homework and school." Similarly, several adolescents ($n = 4$) reported losing the habit of reading: "I just sort of stopped doing it and just found it...I guess, not as enjoyable as I did before." "I definitely used to read more, but I think as you get older, like, there's more distractions.... Technology!" Indeed, other "distractions" (i.e., activities), including seeing friends and playing sports, were also cited by some adolescents ($n = 5$) as reasons for not choosing to read books anymore: "Clubs and stuff 'cause I play sports." "I'd rather be doing other stuff...see my friends."

Reading a book was also seen by some adolescents ($n = 4$) as more effortful than spending time on their phone or watching television: "When I want to relax, I don't tend to do stuff like reading or drawing, anything that really needs my attention." "You get done for the day, and rather than sit down and read a book, you just sit on your phone and watch...YouTube or Netflix or whatever."

Indeed, reading a book was also seen by some adolescents ($n = 4$) as involving quite a lot of time and commitment, so it was not something to be taken lightly: "I think also for teenagers, they need to read, like, longer books to really, like, enjoy it. But then obviously, with that comes more time, more effort, more energy a lot of people just aren't willing to put in." "Sometimes it's just difficult to find that commitment, because it's quite a big commitment, reading a big book, because you spend a lot of time on it."

Some adolescents ($n = 5$) also thought that reading was not cool and that they may be judged on their choice of reading material: "Some teenagers would try to look cool in front of their friends, like 'I'm reading descriptive gore,' and I even find it enjoyable to read something like that." "It's definitely not seen as, like, a cool thing to do."

Several adolescents ($n = 3$) also stated that reading is not encouraged in the same way as it was in primary school: "Like in primary, there used to be reading groups...but I don't think there's such an emphasis on reading once you get into high school." "But I don't think there's such a focus on reading in high school, which I think also stops people from reading in their free time." Furthermore, this was also true of home life, as said by some ($n = 3$): "My mum used to be like, 'Oh, you need to come off your Xbox,' or whatever, like, you know what I mean, when I was younger. But she's not really able to do that anymore."

When it came to choosing a book to read, some adolescents ($n = 6$) noted that they struggled to find one to suit their interests: "I read what's off the bookshelves at the back of the room. Like, I'll just pick up a book, and I'll just maybe start reading it. But I don't really finish it." This was unlike digital devices (i.e., their phones), where recommendations based on their interests would pop up, making that reading selection an easier activity, as said by some ($n = 3$): "It's sort of just presented to you. You know, like, I don't go online to read exclusively, but if it's there, then I may as well read it." "I read a lot of new articles on my phone. When they pop up, I like reading them." On a related note, a few students ($n = 4$) remarked that there are also fewer book options readily available as compared with other text types: "There's kind of more options. Because if you go on BBC News, there's loads of options, whereas when you're at your house, you only have a set amount of books."

Some students ($n = 5$) said book reading was also expensive, inconvenient, and not environmentally friendly: "When it comes to paper books, paper and I—we, sorry, we don't get along very well. They always end up crumpled or something." "When it comes to the physical copy, it's much more expensive. Because it's paper, it's not renewable."

Finally, several adolescents ($n = 6$) felt that reading was something they had grown out of: "With most of my friends, they used to read much more. I mean, I used to read, like, loads and loads. But, um, I don't know, I guess it's just as you get older...it's a dying trend, you know?" "I used to read when I was younger, but when I—but now I... it's just something that's not really what I do anymore." These adolescents recognized that they used to read, but they found it difficult to clearly articulate why they stopped reading or at what point; yet, they recognized this is a pattern that they also saw among their friends.

This study extends previous qualitative research (Howard, 2011; Troyer, 2017; Wilhelm & Smith, 2014) and also makes an important and unique contribution to the research literature by sharing many reasons for why adolescents do not read books (see Figure 2). Although several points were only made by a few students, it is important to note that these were their spontaneous accounts of why they do and do not read books. Large-scale quantitative research would be necessary to identify how prevalent these themes are among the adolescent population.

Educational Implications

Many of the educational implications are borne out of what the adolescents said, stressing the importance

Figure 2
Why Adolescents Do Not Read Books



of more qualitative research to listen and learn from adolescents (Pitcher, Martinez, Dicembre, Fewster, & McCormick, 2010). Indeed, our findings suggest that to support adolescents to read for pleasure, we need to better understand and emphasize their voices so they feel empowered to share their reading experiences. In this study, adolescent readers reported that reading fulfilled a number of needs that are critical during adolescence. For example, reading provided an opportunity to learn, relax, and empathize and afforded opportunities for escapism. Teachers can discuss the benefits of book reading with adolescents, but it is probably more effective for adolescents to actually experience these benefits themselves. Connecting adolescents with books that really resonate with them may help achieve this.

Surprisingly, we found that book reading was not always actively encouraged within high schools (or at home) as compared with primary schools. Given that adolescents have reported less book reading than primary school students have (Clark, 2019) and due to the

known importance of book reading for language and literacy development (e.g., Duncan et al., 2016; Torppa et al., 2019), high schools should actively encourage and support adolescents to read for pleasure. This may be by providing time within the school week to do so or by introducing initiatives to promote reading for pleasure (e.g., First Minister's Reading Challenge, summer reading programs). Other qualitative research has also highlighted the importance of teacher support and high-quality relationships with teachers to support adolescent reading (Heron, 2003).

However, when encouraging greater reading, it is important to acknowledge that some students have difficulties in finding a book suited to their interests. It is therefore crucial that resources are available to support adolescents to make reading choices that align with their interests and ability level (e.g., Bookzilla, myON, Accelerated Reader). Knowledgeable librarians are also vital in high schools. Finally, another challenge reported by students was that reading was effortful

and required a significant time commitment, as books of interest to adolescents are simply longer. This possibly highlights a need for schools and libraries to stock shorter texts (fiction and nonfiction) aimed at young adult audiences.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations with this study. First, the sample size was relatively small. Furthermore, we did not examine our themes in relation to the students' sex or whether or not they described themselves as a reader; analysis focusing on this would be interesting.

TAKE ACTION!

1. Set aside time in the school day for reading for pleasure.
2. Provide up-to-date reading materials relevant to the needs, interests, and experiences of all students; involve students in the selection of these.
3. Create appealing and comfortable spaces to read in school.
4. Encourage staff across subject areas to develop their knowledge of contemporary children's and young adult literature. For example:
 - Signpost to book lists and other resources.
 - Ensure that staff have access to contemporary children's and young adult literature to read.
 - Create a staff book club or discussion space (online or an interactive physical display).
 - Engage in training where available.
5. Encourage students and staff across subject areas to act as reading role models. For example:
 - Wear "Ask me what I'm reading" badges or display what everyone is reading on classroom doors.
 - In assembly, talk about books read.
 - Create recommendation lists and display them.
 - Put recommendation notes in books.
6. Create opportunities for students to discuss what they are reading, with both staff and their peers. For example:
 - Offer interest-based clubs or groups (e.g., a sci-fi book club, a manga book club, a fanfic writing group).
 - Try activities such as book speed-dating.
7. Encourage all students to join the local public library, if accessible.

In addition, the prevalence of the themes was often low; however, these were spontaneous accounts by students, so we cannot draw conclusions about the prevalence of these themes in the adolescent population. For the present study, we chose to include all themes to ensure that the full complexity of the data was realized.

Methodological Considerations

Interviews for this study were conducted by either an adult researcher ($n = 19$ interviews) or student researcher in the presence of an adult ($n = 20$ interviews). We chose to train students as researchers to examine whether this would create more informal conversations about reading than if adolescents were interviewed by an adult. We found no differences in the content shared, but this may have been due to same questions being asked by both the adult and adolescent researchers. Based on our experience, we strongly encourage researchers to consider training students in the future. Indeed, there are existing conversational interview schedules that adolescents could use (e.g., Pitcher et al., 2007). We found that the quality of interviews (i.e., breadth, depth) and of topics covered were similar, yet this approach also provided an opportunity to develop investigative skills and confidence in young people. Furthermore, this approach recognized the value and contribution that students can bring to the research process and ensured that their voices were prioritized throughout.

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- Use the Scottish Book Trust app Bookzilla, which was designed for adolescents ages 11–14 and is free in the United Kingdom through App Store and Google Play. More information is available at <https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/reading-and-stories/bookzilla>.
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